

Chapter 2

Feminist and Queer Theories: The Response to the Social Construction of Gender

One of the obvious trends seen in our interview study was that the responses regarding gender roles, gender identity, and sexuality became more nuanced and elaborated, as one moved from the straight to the gay/lesbian to the transgender interview participants. Gay/lesbian and transgender participants were more likely to have thought about the socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender and sexual identity, about the dynamic interactions between gender and sexuality, and about their own strategies for self-constructing their gender and sexual identities in the context of living in a social environment that defines and enforces norms of gender and sexual behaviors and appearances. Gay/lesbian and transgender participants were also more likely to have read literature from women and gender studies authors about the nature of gender and sexual identity. While some of these differences were undoubtedly due to the greater self-selection of these latter participants into our interview study, this greater awareness of the complexities gender and sexuality also reflected sensitization to issues of gender of sexuality resulting from being in some way gender non-heteronormative in a heteronormative society.

The motivation for feminist and queer theories was to create an intellectual and even moral basis for the challenging of heteronormative assumptions, beliefs, and enforcements that acted to socially subordinate women to men and to discriminate against those who deviated from traditional heteronormative gender and sexual identity. In this chapter, we consider the development of and conflicts between feminist and queer theories in their understandings of gender and sexual identity.

Feminist Theory and Essentialist Conceptualizations of Gender

Feminist theory addresses the cultural/historical context and biological premises of gender, as well as the issues of sexism and the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression. Gender has many functions and many theories that support

its agency. As Hawkesworth (2006) notes, feminist scholars have defined gender in numerous contexts, from an attribute to a type of social organization and as an ideology to sex roles, power differentials, and analytic categories. Gender is key to how we identify people, organize relationships with others, and develop meaning through natural and social events. Harding (1986, p. 18) states, "gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes." Hausman (2001) goes on to say that gender is really an "epistemology" for knowing and understanding the operation of culture in defining identities, where one's perceptions and experiences of the world are attributed to a socially constructed narrative based on one's belonging to one gender category or the other. As Stryker (1994) notes "bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact...Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we are fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy" (p. 249–250).

Gender was traditionally assumed to be based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy (Hausman 2001). From birth, humans are categorized as male versus female based on their external genitalia. Consistent with essentialism, those born male are supposed to act masculine and be sexually attracted to women, while those born female are supposed to act feminine and be sexually attracted to men. Society then uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices to enforce adherence to these gender roles (Connell 2002).

Garfinkel (1967) goes on to say that gender is looked at as being only two categories, male and female, that are exclusive and biologically determined from birth. Garfinkel (1967) notes that since this gendered binary socialization is viewed as being "natural," it is thus not questioned and therefore no "choice" is needed. This is similar to gender being theorized in a way that denotes its utility as part of a "reproductive arena" (Connell 2002), where the woman is the "egg-producer," while the man is the "sperm producer" (Smith 1992). If we look at essentialism from a biological and evolutionary perspective, then the role of male and female is to procreate. The woman is the "egg-producer" and the man is the "sperm producer" (Smith 1992). In doing so, this leaves out the utility of sex for reasons of pleasure and sexual acts between the same sex. As Barrett (1980, pp. 62–77) notes, "a conception of sexuality that reduces the erotic to reproduction." This type of exclusive essentialism also reinforces the traditional gender role schema. The woman will thus take care of the children and the man will "bring home the bacon." Though this may be the traditional way of looking at gender roles, Connell (2002) debunks this by mapping out of the historical roots of gender roles and how gender roles can change based on the needs of the culture and in some respects could be conceptualized as being "situational" (Thorne 1993).

Moodie (1994) discusses this type of situational gender role, when talking about the "men in the mines." The men would do housework, while off in the mines, and the women would perform masculine functions required to maintain

the household, while the men were away. Connell (2002) describes the former gender roles in this cultural setting as, "Manhood principally meant competent and benevolent management of a rural homestead, and participating in its community." Due to the men having to leave their homes for the mines, the dynamic changed, and the men no longer looked at their role as running/managing the households. It was also noted that the men would take "mine wives," while in the mines, and would form intimate relationships with these other men, while away from the women. As the workers returned from the mines, they were subjected to more proletarian beliefs, a sense of strong masculinity was indoctrinated once again, and the wives were viewed as being dependents on the men, who had the qualities of being tough, physically dominant, and aggressive valued by the European system and its belief in traditional gender roles.

Feminism went on to challenge male social dominance, based on the gender binary, by questioning the supposed "naturalness" of the subordination of women in social relationships, due to the purported physical superiority of the male body over the female's supposedly more fragile and vulnerable body. Therefore, feminism helped to not only ground women in an identity but also helped challenge the hierarchical relationships between men and women (Hird 2000). Braidott (1994) goes on to say that, "In the feminist perspective, patriarchy defined as the actualization of the masculine homosocial bond can be seen as a monument denial... insofar as it has been haunted by the political necessity to make biology coincide with subjectivity, the anatomical with the psychosexual, and there reproduction with sexuality" (p. 182). Scott (1986) and Bordo (1993), for example, apply the postmodern perspective of individualism to argue for the social construction of gender and, therefore, that essentialism and the taken for granted role that "the sexed body is given" needs to be questioned. Scott states that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and the gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 1067).

For example, Andrea Dworkin (1989) challenges the assumption that "The power of men is first a metaphysical assertion of self, an *I am* that exists a priori....The woman must, by definition, lack it" (p. 13). Wilchins (2002) goes on to talk about *Man* as the universal and thus women are defined "by her opposition to *Man*, by what she does not have, the Penis, and the one thing she has that *Man* does not, reproduction and sexuality" (p. 57). By arguing that masculinity and femininity are social constructs, feminist theorists are also arguing that traditionally defined gender roles were essentially artificial.

Dworkin goes on to discuss how feminist theory in labeling women as *others*, compared to men, has also indirectly defined women as *being others* and, in turn, the label itself has taken on a negative value with this difference being marked as a label of inferiority. With this difference continuing to be tied to misogynistic beliefs, the belief of being other was thus perpetrated as innate, natural, and determined. "Gender and its masculine and feminine embodiments became a focus of attention: what was horrible and objectionable about male behavior and attitudes became a function of masculine power and privilege, and what was harmful and

debilitating about women's complicity was relocated in our socialized femininity" (Zita 1998, p. 110).

While gender as a socially defined construct and its associated gender roles were actively questioned by feminist theorists, whether gender identity, in terms of an embodied male versus female identity binary, should also be questioned was extremely controversial. Hesse-Biber et al. (1999) discuss how the issue of whether the gender binary itself should be destabilized ultimately polarized feminist theory. French feminists, such as Helene Cixous (1986), Luce Irigaray (1991), and Julie Kristeva (1986), seemed to "establish the female body and maternity as foundational and symbolic sources of women's psychic and sexual difference," i.e., that an essentialist view of "femaleness" as being natural and different from "maleness" was necessary for understanding and empowering women. In contrast, poststructuralist critics, like Judith Butler (1993), argued that the materiality of the body was "already gendered, already constructed" (p. 4), such that the supposed physical basis of the gender binary was a socially derived construction of reality.

As Heyes (2007) discusses, transgenderism/transsexualism's challenge to essentialist ideas of gender identity caused feminist theorists, such as Janice Raymond (1979/1994) and Bernice Hausman (1995), to reject the idea that gender identity could be fluid. To the extent that transsexuals, in particular, were regarded as trying to assume a gender identity opposite from their born sex, Raymond and Hausman dismissed them as being complicit in reinforcing the dominant society's view that socially constructed aspects of gender were essentially linked to this gender identity. The degree and manner to which gender should be deconstructed continues to be both an issue among feminist theorists and a source of tension between feminist and queer theorists (Jagose 2009).

A feminist theory that adheres to an essentialist, fixed binary conception of gender identity has been argued to be inadequate in addressing intersectional issues and fails to account for how a supposedly autonomous self in such a system can be empowered to resist oppression (see also, Shotwell and Sangrey's (2009) critique of liberal-individualist models). Bettcher (2010) notes how Haraway (1991) questions the universality of the experience of oppression among women, while Anzaldua (1987) proposes that it is, in fact, the consciousness of the plurality of selves associated with multiple social identities that allows for resistance to oppression. Braidotti (1994) thus points out how, "The central issue at stake is how to create, legitimate, and represent a multiplicity of alternative forms of feminist subjectivity without falling into relativism. The starting point is the recognition that Woman is a general umbrella term that brings together different kinds of women, different levels of experience, and different identities" (p. 162). Bordo (1993) discusses two primary "currents" that have created a new "gender skepticism." The first talks about the impact of intersectionality and living in "multiple jeopardy." Having multiple forms of oppression is looked at as being very different from the experience of the white, middle class women. By saying that all women experience the same type of oppression, one devalues the experience of women who are subjected to multiple levels of oppression due to their race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation.

Shields (2008) asserts that one's identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials associated with belonging to a certain group or groups. Individuals may belong to multiple socially oppressed groups, experiencing not only the sexism addressed by feminism, but also racism, classism, homophobia, etc. These intersections generate both oppression and opportunity (Zinn and Dill 1996), including opportunities for coalition building to oppose multiple oppressions. As Risman (2004) notes, "one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone" (p. 442). For transgenders, at least two identities, those of gender and of sexuality, are always intersectional, while as discussed below, feminist and queer theorists have at times tried deliberately to keep these identities separate.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is another controversial topic in feminist theory that also challenges the essentialist aspect of some feminist theorizing in favor of a more intersectional understanding. Hegemonic masculinity was an idea first proposed in reports from a field study of social inequality in an Australian high school, in a related conceptual discussion of the making of masculinities and the experience of men's bodies, and in a debate over the role of men in Australian labor politics. As first proposed, hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done and not just a set role off expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. It embodied currently the most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (Connell 1983). The term started out as being a conceptual and empirical model that then was applied to a larger context and framework. The concept was used as a way to look at patterns of resistance and crime, to explore the difficulties with gender-neutral pedagogy, and studying media presentations. It was then used on a larger scale to study men's health practices, risky behaviors, and its application to organizational studies.

Such a view of masculinity was useful for many feminist theorists to understand the basis of men's social power over women, but this version of hegemonic masculinity was also criticized for essentializing male-female differences and for reducing the understanding of gender to power relations of dominance and submission (Moller 2007). In response to such criticisms, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated hegemonic masculinity and proposed a model of multiple masculinities and power relations. This model was then integrated into a new *sociological theory of gender*. Connell and Messerschmidt acknowledged that multiple masculinities may produce a static typology. They essentialize the character of men or impose a false unity on a fluid and contradictory reality. Masculinity is seen in terms of a dichotomy of the biological sex versus gender, where you essentialize male-female difference and ignore difference and exclusion within the gender categories. The concept fails to specify what conformity to hegemonic masculinity looks like in practice. There is also confusion over who is a hegemonically masculine man and also about who can enact hegemonic practices. Hegemonic masculinity can see only

structure, making the subject invisible and does not recognize the multilayered or divided individual. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note how in social theories of gender there has often been a tendency toward functionalism, that is, seeing gender relations as a self-contained, self-producing system, and explaining every element in terms of its function in reproducing the whole. They argue, instead, that the dominance of men and the subordination of women constitute a historical process, not a self-reproducing system.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) thus proposed that multiple hierarchies exist within each gender, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, leading to questioning the universalizing of all men, i.e., all men are not white, middle class, etc. Power and difference were core concepts in the gay liberation moment, which critiqued the oppression of men and the oppression by men in an attempt to deconstruct the male stereotype. The idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from homophobic straight men.

The concept constructs masculine power from the direct experiences of women, rather than from the structural basis of women's subordination. "Patriarchy," the long-term structure of the subordination of women, must be distinguished from "gender," a specific system of exchange that arose in the context of modern capitalism. It is a mistake to treat a hierarchy of masculinities constructed within gender relations as logically continuous with the patriarchal subordination of women. The concept cannot be understood as the settled character structure of any group of men, but rather must question how men conform to an ideal and turn themselves into complicit or resistant types, without anyone ever managing to exactly embody that ideal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The essence of Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation is that hegemonic masculinity must be understood as the result of a dynamic process, such that there is no one "fixed character type" or "assemblage of toxic traits." This moving away from an essentializing of gender moves the understanding of hegemonic masculinity toward the realm of queer theory, where gender and related sexual identities are understood as purely social constructions. Hegemonic masculinity is now partly defined by the practices of women (hegemonic or "emphasized" femininity) and may differ in its manifestations at the local, regional, and global levels. With regard to the latter, local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are said to have a "family resemblance," rather than a necessary logical identity with regional and global manifestations. There is still, however, a need to develop the theorizing about hegemonic masculinity to better incorporate masculine embodiment as an important basis. Transgender individuals challenge purely social constructivist ideas of the bases of hegemonic masculinity. A conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity as being dynamic allows for the possibility of change, including "democratizing gender relations."

According to Wilchins (2004), "While the last 30 years have seen new rights granted to women, gays, and transgender people, this new access and privilege has still left issues of primary gender—of masculinity and femininity—remarkably untouched. Gender stereotypes appear as pervasive, "natural," and inevitable as

ever” (p. 97). In the second wave of feminism, while starting to focus on personal experience, feminism was scrutinized more for its focus on imbalances of power between males and females (Zita 1998), reflected in the concern with hegemonic masculinity. The dilemma was that an essentialist reading of gender power differentials yielded a clear differentiation of the oppressors and the oppressed. This clear differentiation might be useful for motivating the oppressed to think of themselves as a collective entity needing to fight oppression, but it also reifies the system of oppression as being somehow “natural” and does not take into account the intersectionalities of multiple oppressed social identities. This was where queer theory broke from feminist theory.

Queer Theory and Social Constructivism

Much of the philosophical and political understanding of non-heteronormative gender identity and sexuality has derived from *queer theory* with “Modernist sex ontology being challenged by the emergence of postmodern sexual theory and the development of multidimensional sexual orientation research” (Zita 1998, p. 130) that challenges the reductionist explanatory framework of feminist theory. While feminist theory readily accepted and challenged the socially constructed aspects of gender and sexual expression, feminist theorists’ essentializing of gender identity meant that the theory was limited in accommodating the idea that both gender and sexual identity might also be social constructs able to be questioned, subverted, and self-constructed (Halperin 1995). Queer theory thus developed from feminist and deconstructivist theories that posited “normative” and “deviant” sexual behaviors and cognitions as social constructs. The social constructivist approach was a rebellion against the “essentialist” ideas that developed in Western societies beginning in the late nineteenth century. Such essentialist ideas came to tightly link gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation within a binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema (Kimmel 1996; Norton 1997).

According to Norton (1997), “contemporary Euro-American men’s chief concern is fundamentally analogous to that of ancient Greeks and modern Latinos: the maintenance of one’s gender image as honorably masculine, and the retention of the social power and privilege that accompanies a positive attribution of masculinity” (p. 143). The fear is that, once you are able to feminize the male sex, then one would be able to form a feminization of all men, which breaks down the traditionally clear distinction between the superior male and the inferior female. Norton notes the late nineteenth and early twentieth century concerns about the working man becoming disempowered by the feminization of culture and the working man’s incorporation within capitalist systems of production. Femininity was seen as a projection of infantilization and dependency. Norton quotes Kimmel’s (1996) idea that, “The project of Self-Made Masculinity, of a manhood constantly tested and proved, {became} equated with a relentless effort to repudiate femininity, a frantic effort to dissociate from women” (p. 318). “Most terrifying to men was the

specter of the sissy....by the last decade of the century the term had come to mean weakness, dependency, and helplessness—all the qualities that men were not” (Kimmel, p. 122).

From this, Norton (1997) makes the case that sex/gender and sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth century became “mutually determinative constructs,” with sexuality taking on its meaning in terms of sex/gender, and sex/gender elaborating itself as sexuality. To maintain traditional ideas of male superiority, one had to also adhere to traditional ideas of masculine behaviors and appearance and a heterosexual orientation. All of this, in turn, was in service to a society in which “dominance is characteristically the governing aim of male political and cultural action, contemporary scientific and cultural efforts to discipline transgender subjectivities, and bodies to conform to a dimorphic gender system constitute a special form of a broader political agenda—the repression of the queer” (p. 142), where “queer” includes non-traditional gender identities, as well as sexual orientations.

“Queer” is an identity, a theory about non-heteronormative sexuality, and a theoretical orientation for how identity is to be understood. The term “queer” can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1998, p. 208).

Queer is by definition whatever is at odd with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-s-vis* the normative. [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance (Halperin 1995, p. 62).

Queer theory was, in many ways, a challenge to feminist theory. Thus queer theory, more so than feminist theory’s critique of traditional gender roles, is “experienced as a more radical instrumental threat to male hegemony than are more familiar and comfortable binary-based debates about the role of women, the nature of the ‘opposite sex,’ and so on” (Norton 1997, p. 142). Rubin (1993) asserted that, if feminism was framed as a theory of gender oppression, where sexuality was assumed to be tied to gender identity, then one should question whether such a theory of gender oppression could also offer a valid theory of sexual oppression. Weed and Schor (1997) note how sexuality cannot be contained by gender as a category. “The metaphors of fluidity and mosaicism contrast with those of solidarity, unity, and dichotomous purity and suggest, by that contrast, that sexual orientations may be multiple manifestations of unstable, shifting, and overlapping categories of desire” (Zita 1998, p. 130). Boyde notes,

As sex and gender unhinge, so does sexuality, for instance a person with female genitalia who identifies as a man and desires a feminine women might understand himself (or be understood by others) as butch, heterosexual, lesbian, transgendered, transsexual, bisexual, or queer (not a complete list). The variety of possible “sexualities” flags the increased instability of the [physical] body as a knowable signifier for sexual identity, and the variability of identity formation enables a closer look at the influences of race class, nation,

ethnicity, and social geography on the production of sexual desires, practices, and/or identities (2005, p. 103–104).

Wittig (1993) goes on to argue that lesbians' position in the sex/gender binary is unclear and ambivalent, with lesbians being "contemporaneously" women (morphologically), yet not women (heteronormatively).

While feminist theory strongly rooted itself in identity and social activism, queer theory has been noted as being ongoing and a purposefully unfixed site of both engagement and contestation (Jagose 1996) that is constructed as an indefinable and vague set of practices with political positions, similar to feminist theory, that has the potential and capability of challenging normative beliefs, knowledges, and identities (Sullivan 2003). Queer is at odds with the heteronormative, dominant schema (Halperin 1995) and thus rebels against, or "queers," these kinds of essentialist views by proposing that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientations are social constructs and, therefore, open to questioning, subversion, and self-construction.

The "body" in question is the threshold of subjectivity; it is to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and social. This vision implies that the subject is subjected to her/his unconscious; the driving notion of "desire" is precisely that which relays the self to the many "others" that constitute her/his reality (Braidotti 1994, p. 182).

As noted above, queer theory rebels against the kinds of essentialist views described above by proposing that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientations are all social constructs. Butler (1990) makes the case that gender identity is a social construction, as well as the result of repeated performances of the expected behaviors of one's sex that create the illusion of an identity inside that underlies the expression of these behaviors. The presentations of behaviors defined by social conventions creates the illusion of self that is consistent with our culture's assumptions that gender underlies ("ontology") the being of all people and acts as an originating desire or identity from which a person's presentation of self emanates. In other words, there is no central self. The presentations of behaviors defined by social conventions creates the illusion of self that is consistent with our culture's assumptions that gender underlies the psyche of all people, yet the central self is not explored (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010). The central self is mapped onto the individual by the gender performance and society's acceptance of this performance, rather than the questioning of one's own personal identity. These "constructed performances" also act as originating desires or identities from which a person's presentation of self emanates.

This sense of self identity can be a position of empowerment and also confinement. Jagose (1996) notes, "Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out and displays its support, exoskeletally" (p. 132), for example, by exposing and exaggerating the socially assumed aspects of social identities. Hird notes how, "Queer theory presumes that transgressing boundaries will subvert, and eventually dismantle, hierarchies based on sex and gender. But subversion can lead to unanticipated outcomes

that may not be transgressive at all” (2000, p. 359). While queer theory attempts to create the perspective of the queer outside of the heteronormative schema, it has also been critiqued for its lack of ability to deconstruct the individual queer experience. While the term queer offers the solidarity of a group identity, “it is (also) an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995, p. 62). Similar to feminist theory, queer theory established a collective identity but at the expense of an understanding of the individual lived experience (Sullivan 2003).

One of the problems with this particular use of queer as an umbrella term is that it does little if anything to deconstruct the humanist understanding of the subject. Worse still, it veils over the difference between, for example, lesbianism and gayness, between ‘women’, between transsexualism and crossdressing, and ignored differences of class, race, age, and so on, once again positing sexuality as a unifies and unifying factor (Sullivan 2003, p. 44).

Anzaldúa (1991) goes on to note how the term queer promotes a “false unifying umbrella” in which all queers (including from different races, ethnicities, and classes) are placed under. While this umbrella term blurs the fine distinctions of queer individuals, it serves as a root of coalition building by forming a union with one another and thus “solidifies the ranks against outsiders” (1991, p. 250) while indirectly homogenizing and erasing the individual queer experience. Others [gay and lesbians] are afraid that queer might “provide a ready-made instrument of homophobic disavowal” and, therefore, endorse “trendy and glamorously unspecified sexual outlaws to stigmatize and dismiss those still committed to an old fashioned, rigid, and essentialized identity” (Halperin 1995, p. 65).

Queer theory’s critical analysis and application of intersectionality (Shields 2008) is also problematic. Cohen (1997) calls for a “broadened understanding of queerness...based on an intersectional analysis that recognizes how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate the lives of most people” (p. 441). Diamond and Butterworth (2008) note the multiplicity of intersectional identities associated with the transgender experience, but if multiple oppressed social identities are merely the product of multiple social forces, all of which can be queered, there is no explanation of how individuals navigate these multiple identities, nor is there a basis for using these identities as a source of empowerment for opposing oppression. Sullivan expresses how “Queer Theory and/or activism has been accused of being, among other things, male-centered, antifeminist and race-blind,” not to mention focused on the gay man and the male agenda. Queer theory also posits a position of dichotomous categories, such as “us and them,” queer and heterosexual, queer and gay/lesbian,” subsequently situating the heteronormative schema as the dominant and normative position in which gays/lesbians try to aspire to, “whereas all queers are marginalized and consciously and intentionally resist assimilations of any kind” (p. 48–49).

Taylor (2011) “seeks to progress beyond intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm, toward understanding intersectionality as a lived experience, where social class and sexuality may be understood as contested, intersecting categories” (p. 212). The issue of queer theory’s understanding of intersectionality is that, while the theory is better able to accept the fluidity of multiple intersecting identities than

feminist theory, the theory does not provide a basis for understanding how individuals somehow integrate these multiple identities for self-empowerment and to oppose oppression. As will be discussed further in [Chap. 5](#), these limitations of queer theory for understanding the lived experiences of transgender individuals center around experiences of embodiment and the role of such embodiment in defining one's gender and sexual identity. Prosser (1998) criticizes queer theorists, such as Butler (1990), for subsuming transgenderism under queer theory by interpreting the transgender experience as being just another example of the subverting of socially constructed gender and sexual roles and identity and the performance of alternative constructions of gender and sexuality. The primacy of the socially constructed aspect of the body for queer theorists is reflected in Butler's (1990) assertions that:

Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own (p. 21).

In contrast, Prosser argues that many transsexuals are not queer, that the certain experience of being embodied in the "wrong" gender, and the subsequent "correction" of this, perhaps through medical means, is only interpreted by that individual as being now able to manifest the "correct" gender roles and identity. For such a transsexual, the physical transformation of the body is not intended to subvert existing social constructions of gender and sexuality.

With the example of the social rejection of the "male lesbian" by female lesbians for having the "wrong body," Zita (1998) also points out the problems inherent in a purely social constructivist conceptualization of gender and sexuality that "reflects personal and social formations of sex, gender, and sexuality as meanings and identities made out of nature" (p. 96). She proposes, instead, strategies that "allow the body to enter a conversation with others, with a request for a particular reading of the body, an acceptance into a particular group, and a respect for the subject's desire to name 'her' own sexual identity" (p. 99). Gender and sexual identity clearly needs to be understood in terms of a dynamic interaction between socially constructed and embodied experiences.

Intersex Identity

Before leaving the discussion of feminist and queer theories, we consider another controversial topic for these theories, that of understanding the gender and sexual identities of intersex individuals. One of the primary contradictions of essentialism is the assumption that gender identity "naturally" comes from the physically sexed body. This is not true, whether when considered from the feminist and queer theories discussed above or when considered from the quantitative and qualitative

research evidence presented in the rest of this book. What is clear from our qualitative research on the perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation in straight, gay/lesbian, and transgender individuals (Nagoshi et al., 2012a; 2012b) is that most individuals in our society can separate out gendered behavior and appearance from gender identity from sexual behavior and identity. Many understand that these aspects of gender and sexual identity have socially constructed and embodied bases, but that there are also options to self-construct these identities for oneself.

As essentialist understanding of gender and sexual identity is clearly problematic for people who are intersexed, those who for chromosomal or hormonal reasons are born with ambiguous genitalia (literally, too short penises or too long clitorises) (Preves 2005). In order to “correct” for this “gender mishap,” the individual will most likely be assigned a biological sex upon their birth based on their secondary sexual characteristics. This is done to supposedly help detour pathological problems caused by one’s physical gender identity not matching one’s expected gender role. This “gender correction” was also done historically in the case of homosexuality, when it was part of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM). Such “gender correction” is still a driving motivation for clinical practitioners in the current requirement of a DSM Gender Identity Dysphoria diagnosis, in order for transgender individuals to have sex reassignment surgery in this country, which will be discussed in [Chap 8](#).

A completely binary gendered world provides society with a simple, ready-made schema for defining groups of individuals and organizing their communications and interactions. The case of an intersex birth, though, a birth where one’s sex cannot readily be ascertained, announced, and counted upon, provides a poignant example of normative expectations remaining unfulfilled (Preves 2005, p. 18). Fausto-Sterling (2000) noted that, in order to “maintain gender divisions, we must control those bodies that are so unruly as to blur the borders. Since intersexuals quite literally embody both sexes, they weaken claims about sexual difference” (p. 8). One can then ascertain the social response of breaking away from these social norms by understanding three basic elements: (1) the existence of a shared social norm, (2) deviation from that norm, (3) and the social response to this deviation (Garfinkel 1967). Applying this to intersex, upon birth, the shared social expectation is of two distinct anatomical genitalia to choose from. Upon birth, the inability to assign a biological sex, or upon puberty, the incohesive developmental trajectory causes a violation or break in the norm. The social reaction then primarily becomes medical, as we attempt to “fix” the gender violation (Preves 2005).

This is an example of how medical intervention supports the gendered social norm. Many parents are not given the opportunity to even think about, consult, or determine what to do in this “medical emergency” (Fausto-Sterling 2000), rather, the choice of surgery is thrust upon them as the moral choice and one that should be made quickly. Some argue that the reason for surgery that corrects for intersex externally ambiguous genitalia is for the good of the child, who will have to learn to cope with the developmental milestones that are dissimilar to others around them. By having the surgery, the individual will not appear to be unusual and will

not think of themselves as being the other (Preves 2005). The surgery, however, can result in numerous complications to the newborn's health, with possible long term damage being done to the fragile skin and external organs that we as society tie to sexuality, which begs the question again of why such invasive and probably physically harmful procedures are considered necessary. In fact, nearly all of the intersex individuals interviewed by Preves (2005) felt that the invasiveness of the surgeries and the medicalization of their lives growing up were far more destructive of their psychological development than any issues that might have been caused by their ambiguous genitalia. If one accepts an essentialist view of gender as deriving from physical sex, then intersex individuals embody a gender that is literally in between the categories of the heteronormative gender binary. One can then see the irony of medical doctors and psychiatrists believing that they can use medical procedures and forced socialization to artificially put an intersex individual in one gender category or the other.

This is not to simplify the discourse between multiple genders and intersexuality. There is a difference between the intersex child who is thrust into the decision by their parents to have surgery and the transsexual individual who believes that they are "trapped" in the wrong body and chooses to have sex reassignment surgery. In looking at the narratives of the lived experiences of intersex individuals, such as those interviewed by Preves (2005), versus the narratives of lived experiences of transgender/transsexual individuals, such as those we interviewed, what is similar is the acute awareness of the many forces that determine gender and sexual identity, a belief in the fluidity and intersectionality of such identities, and an understanding of the dynamic relationships between the embodied and socially constructed aspects of such identities. The similarities in these narratives are notable, given the differences in where intersex versus transgender individuals are coming from with regard to gender and sexual identity. The intersex individual typically has had the sex assignment surgery early in life and then finds that their gender and sexual identity do not fit the socially constructed gender box they've been assigned to. The transgender/transsexual individual early in life feels that their gender and sexual identity do not fit the socially constructed gender box they've been assigned to, and so some then seek sex reassignment surgery to "fix" this.

The nature of intersexuality is rarely considered in theoretical discourses on gender and sexual identity. With the label of "other" being used in the context of women, then queers, and finally the "other" for the category of transgender individuals, it can be argued that intersex individuals have still not found a home to which they can promote coalition building and advocacy. Arguably, intersex individuals are at the outskirts of feminist, queer, and transgender theories of gender. Feminist theory, with its ties to the gender binary, would have a difficult time accommodating intersex individuals who are of both biological sexes. The intersex individual who searches for an empowered gendered identity in feminism, would be questioned by feminists as not being a real women, since the intersex individual has not experienced living as a female within the patriarchy associated with being a woman (Hird 2000). For queer theory, the importance of an ambiguous

embodiment—for the identity of the intersexual individual is ignored, and the absence of sexual identity and expression that can result from some surgical procedures, can render many intersex individuals as not belonging to a performative gender or sexual identity category. Once again, as has been discussed throughout this chapter, there is an issue of feminist and queer theory being unable to handle fluid, but nevertheless partly embodied gender and sexual identities. Interestingly, as far back as the writing of Money et al. (1957), there is a discussion of how “gender role and orientation is not determined in some automatic, innate, instinctive fashion by physical agents like chromosomes. On the other hand, it is also evident that the X of assignment and rearing does not automatically and mechanistically determine gender role and orientation” (p. 333–334). The performance of gender outside a clearly defined biological and physical gender can leave the individual trying to construct a gender role that inhabits the limitations of both genders or is not clearly defined by others who subjectively define the intersex person as lacking the ability to perform both. Nevertheless, it should be noted that historical changes in societal reactions to children being born as intersex, partly the result of gender-related social activism, partly inspired by feminist and queer theory, has caused many parents to now choose to not have the corrective surgery, when the child is born, but rather wait till the child is old enough to make the decision themselves (Preves 2005).

Transgender theory, to be discussed in detail in [Chap. 5](#), and the choice to change one’s gender versus the nature of being born with a biological difference, has become a topic of heated debate among transgender theorists regarding intersex individuals. The idea that transgender individuals have the option to conform to their assigned biological gender whereas intersex cannot brings to light the opinion that many transgender individuals, like gay individuals, can pass, if they choose to. Although both intersex and transgender individuals have to construct an embodied experience of their gender through an artificial labeling of their external genitalia tied to their assigned biological sex, there is the ongoing perception that transgender sex reassignment surgery is a choice that doesn’t have to be made.

To counter that, though, the need to understand embodiment can occur at the crossroad of transgender and intersex identity. For transsexuals, “both/neither” (Roen 2001) means that the embodied aspects of their gender identity can switch between the male/female poles or be fluidly in-between. The psychological conflicts about gender identity have been about embodied experiences that run counter to socialization processes associated with being in an assigned biological sex, thus starting the sex reassignment surgery process is the first time that transgender individuals experience the essence of the intersex experience, which is to be physically “both/neither.” For intersex individuals, “both/neither” is the embodiment of their biological sex; the attempts of society to force them into one physical and psychological gender identity or the other is different from that of transsexuals in that embodiment is always an issue.

At the end of this chapter on feminist and queer theories, it is clear that both theories are limited in incorporating embodiment into their understandings of gender and sexuality. Wilchins discusses how “We might well declare that there are

only two genders, or a 100, or even none, because gender is entirely constructed. But we need to qualify our assertions with the understanding that these are not just statements of reality but political statements as well: they serve certain agendas, they empower or erase certain bodies” (p. 102). Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for “sex,” the more it becomes clear that “sex” is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender (Fausto-Sterling 2000, p. 4). As Wilchins (2004) notes, “it may be that binary gender is so fundamental to social reality that it may be impossible to evolve the discourse. We may need to nuke the discourse, to completely undermine it” (p. 97). “Nuking the discourse,” however, may be more about a dialectical transcendence than about leveling everything and starting all over. As the quantitative and qualitative research findings presented in the next two chapters will make clear, the gender binary, however socially constructed, does universally define and enforce an all-encompassing set of socially expected appearances and behaviors. While there are certainly variations in these expected gender-related appearances and behaviors, with some of these variations deriving from intersections with other social identities, such as those of race/ethnicity, social class, etc., there is much broad understanding and agreement as to what these gender expectations are, whether one is strictly heteronormative, gay/lesbian, or transgender. The pervasiveness and stability of this heteronormative gender binary system in defining individuals’ gender and sexual identities, whether these individuals are conforming to or reacting against this system, needs to be included in any theory of gender and sexual identity. To the extent that embodied experiences are important in reinforcing or challenging heteronormativity, this must be understood in the context of the dynamic interactions between socially constructed versus embodied experiences in defining both of these kinds of experiences in gender and sexual identity. And finally, to the extent that all of these socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender and sexual identity can be queered for the empowerment of individuals or groups, there must be an acknowledgment that merely de-stabilizing gender and sexual identities through queering them is insufficient to self-construct a truly empowered identity.